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(12)

Fig 1

EP 1 008 527 A1

Description

[0001] The present invention relates to an injection-moulded plastic crate according to the preamble of claim 1. The invention furthermore relates to the production of a crate of this nature.

[0002] A crate according to the preamble of claim 1 is known, for example, from DE 196 13 494. This known crate has two mutually opposite side walls which are provided with an imprint, for example an indication of the name of the manufacturer, an indication of the goods which are present in the crate and/or a decorative image.

[0003] The imprint is applied by means of a technique which is known in the specialist trade as the "in-mould labelling technique". In this technique, preprinted labels made from a suitable plastic film are used to form the final imprint on the crate. As described in DE 196 13 494, a label of this nature - before the molten plastic is injected-placed at the intended location in the injection mould, against a planar mould wall, and is then held in place. In this case, it is held in place by means of vacuum-application channels which are arranged in the planar mould wall and by means of which the label is sucked onto the mould wall around its periphery. Other known methods of holding the label against the planar mould wall comprise the use of static electricity or the use of a carrier film which on one side bears the preprinted film in such a manner that it can be removed and on the other side is, for example, of adhesive design, so that this adhesive side sticks to the mould wall and can be pulled off after the crate has been moulded.

[0004] Labels of this nature are used in particular to attract the attention of the shopping public and to influence market awareness of the products on offer, which reasons are covered by the term "marketing".

[0005] The object of the present invention is to propose measures which further increase this effect of the printing of drawing attention to the crates and which also provide new options for designing crates of this nature, so that it is possible to produce crates with a significantly changing visual appearance.

[0006] According to a first aspect, the present invention provides a crate according to the preamble of claim 1 which is characterized in that the plate-like body of the side wall, in an area which is covered by the preprinted label, has a relief with respect to the plane of the side wall. By arranging the preprinted labels not on a completely planar plate-like body of the side wall of the crate, as has been the case in previously known crates, but rather on a part of the plate-like body which is provided with a suitable relief, it is possible to considerably improve the attention-drawing effect of a preprinted label, and the crate is able to present an attractive and new image to the consumer.

[0007] In a preferred embodiment, the plate-like body of the side wall is completely or at least virtually completely planar in the area where the side wall is cov-

ered by a peripheral-edge region of the label which extends along the periphery of the label. The contact between the peripheral edge region of the label and a planar region of the side wall substantially avoids the risk of molten plastic penetrating onto the outside of the label during injection-moulding, which would mean the label being partly covered by plastic material.

[0008] In a practical embodiment, the relief is a double-curved surface. In a further practical embodiment, the double-curved surface itself is substantially smooth. However, it will be clear that the inventive idea can be applied to all kinds of different relief designs, for example in the form of letter shapes and/or logos which project inwards and/or outwards with respect to the plane of the side wall and are covered by printing on the preprinted label, such as for example letters or (letter-)contour lines, with the result that the effect of the letters or logos is promoted by the shape of the relief.

[0009] In a practical embodiment, the relief projects outwards with respect to the planar part of the plate-like body, in which case the side wall in question is also provided with integral protective components, in particular a protective edge which lies at a distance around the relief, which protective components project outwards beyond the relief. This design protects the label which is arranged on the relief from damage, for example by being torn as a result of touching other crates.

[0010] GB 2,185,708 has disclosed a method for the injection-moulding of plastic products with a label, in which the label is provided with a central hole. In this method, the label is firstly arranged against a first mould part which is provided with a recess and is held in position. A second mould part which, together with the first mould part, defines the wall of the product is provided with a projecting injection nozzle which fits through the hole in the label. During injection-moulding, the plastic flows over the label in all directions, and the label then bears against the second mould part. In the process, therefore, the label comes off the first mould part.

[0011] This known method has a number of drawbacks. Firstly, the label comes off the first mould part, and it is assumed that then the contact between the edge of the hole in the label and that part of the injection nozzle which fits through it holds the label in place to a sufficient extent. This only works for thick, strong labels, yet in the in-mould labelling technique it is preferred to use thin, film-like labels. A further drawback is that in the centre of the label it is clearly apparent that plastic material has been injected at this location, known as a sprue. In view of the high requirements imposed on the appearance of crates, such a sprue at this location is in principle unacceptable. Finally, in this known method the label is located in a recess in the wall of the product, while it is preferable to arrange the label over an outwardly projecting relief.

[0012] The present invention provides a method for producing crates as described in claim 9.

[0013] The invention will be explained in more detail

below with reference to the drawing, in which:

Fig. 1 shows a diagrammatic, perspective view of an exemplary embodiment of a crate according to the invention.

Fig. 2 shows a cross section on line A-A in Figure 1, Fig. 3 shows a diagrammatic cross section through part of an injection mould for the injection-moulding of the crate shown in Figure 1, and

Fig. 4 shows an illustration corresponding to Figure 3 in a different position of the mould.

[0014] Figure 1 shows an injection-moulded plastic bottle crate 1, having a rectangular base 2 and having four raised side walls 3, 4, 5, 6 which are connected to one another at the corners of the crate 1. In the crate 1 there is a compartment divider which forms compartments which are open at the top and are each intended to accommodate a bottle. Each side wall 3-6 is provided with a handle opening 7 for carrying the crate 1.

[0015] The four side walls 3-6 each have a plate-like body which, due to the injection-moulding, is integral with the rest of the crate. In Figure 1, two of these plate-like bodies are clearly visible, namely the plate-like bodies 10 and 11. These plate-like bodies 10, 11 are recessed inwards, both with respect to the outside of the corner parts 12, 13, 14 of the crate and with respect to a bottom edge 15 which extends along the underside of the crate 1 and a top edge 16 which extends along the top side of the crate 1.

[0016] The plate-like bodies 10, 11, as well as the plate-like bodies of the other two side walls of the crate 1, are each provided with an outwardly protruding relief 17, 18, respectively. In this example, these reliefs 17, 18 are each a double-curved surface with an oval peripheral edge 19, 20, the curvature of the surface being directed outwards. The oval peripheral edges 19, 20 form the transition between the relief 17, 18 and the planar section 21, 22 of the plate-like body 17, 18, which lies around the relief as a type of ring.

[0017] A preprinted label 24, 25 of the type described above is positioned over each relief 17, 18, so that the printing is supported by the shape of the relief. In this case, as is preferably, a peripheral-edge region 26, 27 of each label 23, 24 lies in the planar section of the corresponding plate-like body around the outside of the relief 17, 18. As can be seen clearly from the cross section shown in Figure 2, the plate-like bodies are preferably of uniform wall thickness at the location of the relief and preferably also in the planar section.

[0018] In the cross section shown in Figure 2, and also in Figures 3 and 4, which are yet to be explained, the thickness of the label is exaggerated for the sake of clarity, since, as the person skilled in the art will be aware, labels used for the in-mould labelling technique are usually extremely thin.

[0019] It will also be clear from the illustration shown in Figures 3 and 4 that the label 24 does not lie

on the plate-like body, but rather is embedded therein. In the sketch shown in Figure 2, the label 24 appears to rest on the plate-like body, in particular on its planar section, but this appearance results from the exaggerated thickness of the label in the drawing.

[0020] It can be clearly seen from Figure 2 that even that part of the relief covered by the label which projects furthest outwards is located further inwards than the outside of the side wall of the crate, so that the label is protected from wear.

[0021] The method for producing the crate described above, in particular that part which is relevant for positioning of the label, will be explained below with reference to Figures 3 and 4.

[0022] Figures 3 and 4 diagrammatically show part of an injection mould for a crate, specifically in cross section through that part which ultimately forms a side wall of the crate, i.e. in fact corresponding to the cross section from Figure 2.

[0023] Figures 3 and 4 show two mould parts of an injection mould used to produce the crate 1, specifically a first mould part 31 and a second mould part 32. The first mould part has a mould wall 33 which defines the outside of the side wall 3 of the crate 1, only that section of the plate-like body 22 which lies in the area of the label 24 being shown in these figures. The second mould part 32 has a mould wall 34 which defines the inside of the side wall 3 of the crate 1.

[0024] The mould wall 33 is provided with a recess 35 which corresponds to the desired outer surface of the relief 17 and, around the recess 35, forms a planar peripheral region which defines the planar section 22 of the plate-like body 10.

[0025] A peripheral groove 36 is formed in the mould wall 33 around the recess 35, which peripheral groove serves as a vacuum-application groove and, via one or more passages 37, is connected to a vacuum source (not shown). The groove 37 may, for example, be in the form of a narrow gap, for example with a width of the order of 1/10 millimetre. Such a gap can be obtained if the section containing the recess 35 is designed as an insert in the mould part, and the gap which remains is used as a vacuum-application groove. As an alternative, the groove does not have to be designed as a groove which runs all the way around, but rather as a succession of partial grooves or of vacuum-application holes.

[0026] The mould wall 34 of the second mould parts 32 is provided with a protrusion 38 which substantially corresponds to the shape of the recess 35 in order ultimately to achieve a wall thickness which is as uniform as possible, which is of relevance for cooling of the crate 1 after injection-moulding.

[0027] In Figure 3, it can be seen that the size of the preprinted label 24 is such that it covers the vacuum-application groove 36 in the mould wall 33, and the label is held against the first mould part 31 as a result of a vacuum being applied in this groove 36. The label 24 can be applied by moving the second mould part 32 at

such a distance away from the first mould part 31, or removing it completely, in such a manner that the location for the label 24 can be reached by hand or by a mechanical label-positioning device.

[0028] As shown in Figure 3, air is enclosed between the flat label 24 and the mould wall 33.

[0029] For injection-moulding, the second mould part 32 is then moved into the desired position with respect to the first mould part 31, which position is shown in Figure 4. It is preferable to attempt to make the wall thickness of the plate-like body 10 which is to be formed as uniform as possible. It can be seen that positioning the second mould part 32 presses the label 24 inwards, towards the recess in the first mould part 31. Since the label 24 is sufficiently oversized with respect to the vacuum-application groove 36, the label 24 continues to cover this groove 36 when the mould parts 31, 32 are in their injection-moulding position. If the protrusion of the double-curved surface is relatively slight, it is conceivable for the label 24 to remain flat even in the position of the mould parts 31, 32 which is shown in Figure 4.

[0030] Then, to produce the crate 1, molten plastic is introduced into the injection mould at high pressure. In this process, plastic is introduced into the mould at positions which are such that, in the cavity which ultimately forms the plate-like body 10, a front of molten plastic moves in, for example indicated by arrow B, which front then, as it were, starting from a peripheral edge of the label 24, slides over the label 24 when the mould is filled with plastic. In the process, the label 24 continues to bear against the mould wall 33 against which the label 24 had originally been placed. Thus, any air which was enclosed between the label 24 and the first mould part 31 is pressed out from under the label 24 in front of the advancing front of molten plastic. It is important for at least that part of the label 24 which spans the recess 35 to form a closed surface, so that it is impossible for any plastic to penetrate between the label 24 and the mould wall 33. The air which is expelled, or some of this air, could be sucked out via the vacuum-application groove 36. The air can also emerge from under the label and be removed from the mould in some other way.

[0031] The label 24 is (then) pressed taut against the recess 35 in the mould part 31 by the front of molten plastic which is moving over it. In Figure 4, the plastic material is indicated by dots. The excess dimensions of the label 24 with respect to the vacuum-application groove 36, as well as any slight stretching of the label material, ensure that the vacuum-application groove 36 remains covered by the label 24. Surprisingly, the label 24, which bears strongly against the mould wall 34 only along its peripheral edge, remains in place, while the label 24 is nevertheless subjected to a considerable shear load by the molten plastic moving over the label from a peripheral edge. One possible explanation is that the plastic initially flows over a peripheral area of the

label 24 which bears against the planar part of the mould wall 33 and therefore that part is immediately held securely in place by the combination of the vacuum and the pressure from the plastic material.

[0032] With the shape of the relief 17 as described here, it has proven unnecessary to remove the air between the label 24 and the mould wall 34 before the mould is closed and the molten plastic is injected. This is probably due to the gradual transitions between the parts of the mould wall, in particular, in this slightly double-curved shape, at the relief.

[0033] For more extreme forms of relief, however, it may be desirable for the air between label and mould wall to be partially or completely removed in advance in order to avoid air inclusions. This may, inter alia, be achieved by pressing the label against the mould wall by means of a soft, elastic pressure-exerting member, for example a block of foamed plastic or rubber, if appropriate using a robot. The label could also have already been made more or less in the shape of the relief in some other way.

[0034] The film of the label 24 bonds very strongly to the molten plastic of the crate 1, so that after the plastic has cooled sufficiently the mould can be opened and the crate can be removed, during which process the label 24 sticks very well to the plate-like body 10 of the side wall 3. The fact that a peripheral-edge region 26 of the label 24 covers the planar section of this plate-like body 10 means that excellent bonding of the label is ensured at least at this location. This also prevents plastic from penetrating between the label 24 and the mould wall 34 via any small crease in the label 24 during the injection of molten plastic.

[0035] It will be clear that the shape and location of the reliefs 17, 18 which are shown here form only one of the many possible arrangements, and that completely different solutions also fall within the scope of the appended claims.

[0036] In a simple variant, the relief could project inwards with respect to the surrounding planar section of the plate-like body of the side wall of the crate, instead of projecting outwards; a combination of inwards and outwards would also be possible. Also, there may be a plurality of reliefs, covered by one or more preprinted labels, per side wall. By way of example, the reliefs may be letters or letter contours.

Claims

1. Injection-moulded plastic crate (1), comprising a base (2) and raised side walls (3-6) which are connected to one another at the corners of the crate, the crate being provided with at least one handle (7) for carrying the crate, and at least one of the side walls (3-6) comprising a plate-like body (10, 11) which is made from plastic and on the outside of which a preprinted label (24, 25) made from plastic film is arranged by placing the preprinted label -

- before molten plastic is introduced into a suitable injection mould - at the intended location in the injection mould and then securing it at this location, wherein the label forms a strong bond with the plastic material of the crate, characterized in that the plate-like body (10, 11) of the side wall (3, 4), in an area which is covered by the preprinted label (24, 25), has a relief (17, 18) with respect to the plane of the side wall (3, 4).
2. Crate according to claim 1, in which the plate-like body (10, 11) of the side wall is substantially planar (21, 22) where it is covered by a peripheral-edge region (26, 27), which extends along the periphery, of the label (24, 25).
 3. Crate according to claim 1 or 2, in which the relief (17, 18) forms a double-curved and substantially smooth surface.
 4. Crate according to one or more of the preceding claims, in which the relief projects outwards with respect to the planar part (21, 22) of the plate-like body (10, 11), and in which the side wall in question is also provided with integral protective components (12, 13, 14, 15, 16), in particular a protective edge which lies at a distance around the relief, which protective components project outwards beyond the relief.
 5. Crate according to one or more of the preceding claims, in which the crate has a rectangular base (2) and four side walls (3-6), which each have a plate-like body which lies further inwards than the outside of the corner parts (12, 13, 14) of the crate, a bottom edge (15) which extends along the underside of the crate, and a top edge (16) which extends along the top side of the crate, each plate-like body (10, 11) being provided with a double-curved, outwardly protruding relief (17, 18) with an oval peripheral edge (19, 20) which forms the transition to the planar section of the plate-like body, with a preprinted label (24, 25) over each relief, a peripheral-edge region (26, 27) of which label lies over the planar section of the plate-like body around the outside of the relief.
 6. Crate according to one or more of the preceding claims, in which the plate-like body (10, 11) is of substantially uniform thickness.
 7. Crate according to one or more of the preceding claims, in which at least two side walls which lie opposite one another are provided with a handle opening (7).
 8. Crate according to one or more of the preceding claims, in which the crate (1) is a bottle crate and a compartment divider is arranged in the crate.
 9. Method for producing a crate according to one or more of the preceding claims, comprising the use of a suitable injection mould having a first mould part (31), a mould wall (34) of which is provided with a recess (35) corresponding to the outer surface of the relief (17), around which relief (35) the mould wall forms a planar peripheral-edge region, an encircling vacuum-application groove (36) being formed in the planar peripheral-edge area, which groove is connected, via one or more associated passages (37), to an actuable vacuum source, and having a second mould part (32) which can move with respect to the first mould part (31) and, in an injection-moulding position, together with the first mould part delimits a plate-shaped cavity which corresponds to the shape of the plate-like body (10) of the side wall (3) of the crate which is to be formed, the method comprising the following steps:
 - arranging a preprinted label (24) made from plastic film against the mould wall (34) which is provided with the recess (35), in such a manner that a peripheral-edge region (26) of the label bears against the planar section of the mould wall and covers the vacuum-application groove (36);
 - moving the first and second mould parts (31, 32) into the injection-moulding position, so that a plate-shaped space is delimited between the first and second mould parts,
 - injecting molten plastic into the injection mould, in such a manner that the plastic flowing into the plate-shaped space flows over the label (24) from a peripheral edge and displaces any air which is present between the preprinted label (24) and the mould wall, in which case the label (24) presses against the mould wall (33) which is provided with a recess (35).
 10. Method according to claim 9, in which the mould wall (34) is only provided with the encircling vacuum-application groove (36) and is closed in the region of the recess (35) therein, which forms the relief.
 11. Method according to claim 9 or 10, in which the preprinted label is positioned with the aid of an elastically compressible positioning body which has a holding surface for holding a preprinted label which is to be positioned, which positioning body presses the preprinted label against the mould wall, including its wall section which delimits the recess, the positioning body undergoing elastic deformation, in such a manner that the label bears against the mould wall over substantially its entire surface, after which a vacuum is applied via the vacuum-applica-

tion groove.

12. Method according to one or more of claims 9-11, in which the molten plastic is injected into the injection mould outside the plate-shaped space between the first and second mould parts (31, 32), and preferably the injection takes place in that part of the mould which forms the base of the crate, in such a manner that the molten plastic flows over the preprinted label (24) from one side.

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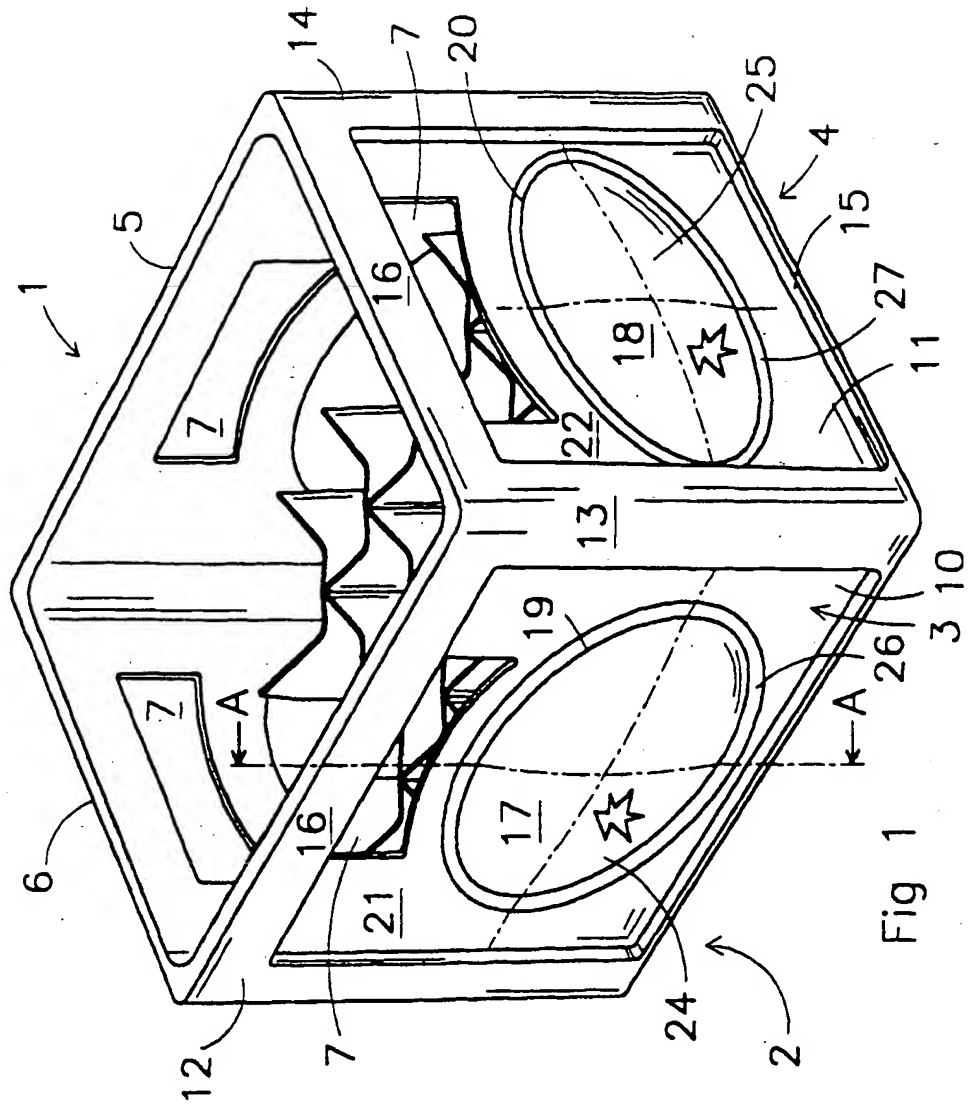


Fig 1

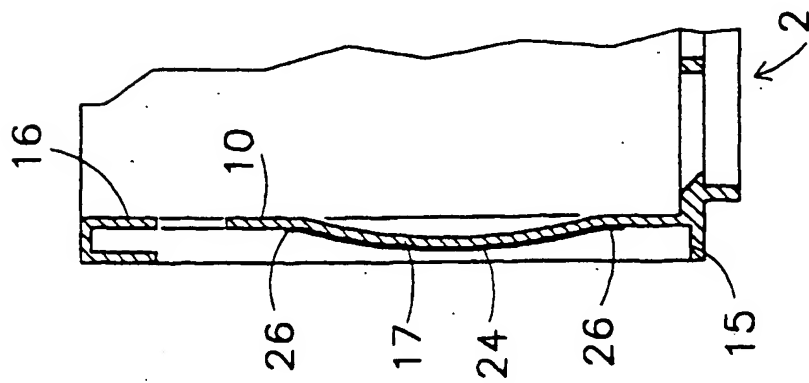
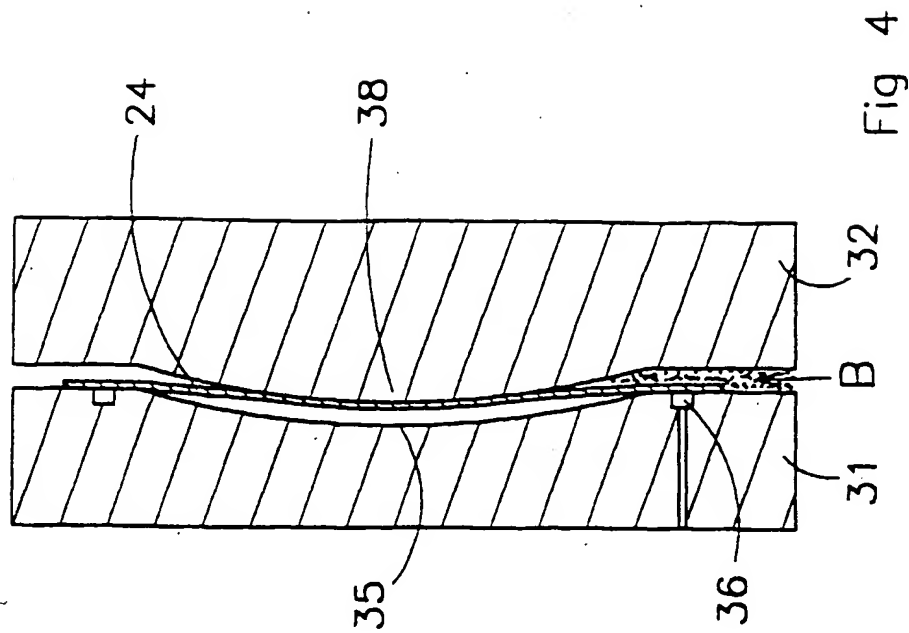
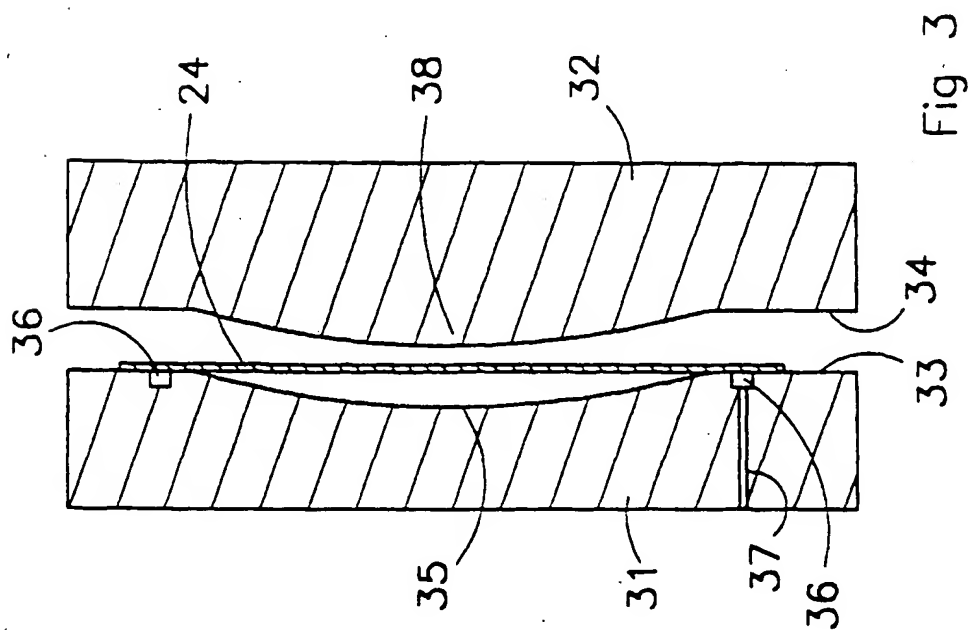


Fig 2





European Patent
Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 99 20 3748

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| Place of search THE HAGUE | | Date of completion of the search 25 February 2000 | Examiner Martin, A |
| <p>CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS</p> <p>X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document</p> <p>T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons & : member of the same patent family, corresponding document</p> | | | |

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**ANNEX TO THE EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT
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EP 99 20 3748

This annex lists the patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned European search report. The members are as contained in the European Patent Office EDP file on
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